

North Cowichan seeks \$10 million grant for childcare spaces ^[1]

Municipality working with Parkside Academy Childcare Society

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EXCERPTS

North Cowichan council is supporting a \$10-million grant application for more childcare spaces in the municipality.

If the application is successful, the grant from the Community Childcare BC New Spaces Fund would help pay for the creation of new childcare spaces for the Parkside Academy Childcare Society at a new facility on Morton Way, just northwest of North Cowichan municipal hall.

With a staff of approximately 20, Parkside currently offers pre-school and after school programs for approximately 200 children, aged up to 12 years old.

In conjunction with Parkside, North Cowichan staff had developed plans for an \$8.1-million childcare centre in 2021 that would replace the society's current facility, and applied for funding for phase one of the project from B.C.'s New Spaces Fund to help build it.

But that application was denied almost three months ago for a number of reasons, including the inability of the applicants to secure funding for phase two of the project and other issues with the proposal.

But last month, the province released an updated NSF grant program which relaxed some of the criteria, including removing the maximum funding availability for each application, which was previously set at \$3 million.

"The grant [application] also provides a review and approval [or denial] turnaround estimated to be six weeks," said Don Stewart, North Cowichan's director of parks and recreation.

"This is decreased from the four-month turnaround with the previous application process."

At the council meeting on June 15, Coun. Christopher Justice said there's some uncertainty as to the actual construction costs of the new facility at this stage of planning that may result in cost overruns that could have implications for the municipality as it would be responsible for any extra costs.

"Does taking this step and applying for the grant somehow lock us in, or could we still back away in the future if it was determined that construction costs are going to be much higher than anticipated?" he asked.

Stewart said the \$10-million estimate to build the new facility was based on the estimates that the applicants had developed in 2021, and acknowledged costs could be slightly higher for this project.

He said if the application is successful, it would be four to six months before North Cowichan could go to tender for the project.

"We can't predict the future, but we know where we are with current cost estimates," Stewart said.

"Prior to going to tender, we'd do a final cost estimate to make sure we have the appropriate budget before tendering, and that would be the opportunity for council to give the project its blessing or not."

Mayor Al Siebring added that the grant can be applied for and it can be approved, but North Cowichan would still have time to decide if it wants to move forward.

"If we determine that it's going to cost \$14 million and we're on the hook for \$4 million, we can give this money back," he said.

CAO Ted Swabey said that's correct, but in his experience once the process starts rolling, it's difficult to stop.

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

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